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ABSTRACT

Compulsive Resume Addiction (CRA) is a condition where applicants become dependent on their written credentials to get new employment. It is similar to other addictions in that the person manifests short-term, gratification-seeking behavior with the long term cost in self-esteem and self-confidence. Applicants get stuck in thinking that a better resume or better cover letter is the key to getting a job. Applicants can get so ingrained in a bad job search technique that it becomes difficult to change direction. Several counseling techniques are described that can help applicants get unstuck. First, the clients have to realize that the way they are conducting their job search is the problem and is preventing them from getting employment. Second, the counselor must help them understand they do have worth and that someone will hire them. Occupational research in career and vocational areas has proven helpful in this area. Information interviewing is useful in gathering information and in getting applicants out to talk with people in the job search situation. Using networks and contacting employers directly are two of the most effective job search methods. Case examples are included. (JDM)

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Counseling Compulsive Resume Addiction

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Prologue

"Tell me what's wrong with my resume," said Max, a new client, with a defeated-from-the-start tone of voice. I looked across my desk and studied his face. He was thirty-three years old, though his wrinkled face, gray hair, and sunken cheekbones almost made him seem fifty-three.

Next, I studied his resume. I have been studying people and resumes for a long time. I am a Career Counselor and have been in private practice for seventeen years. During this time, I have not seen it all, but I have seen quite a bit.

The resume was on cream colored paper, good quality linen stock and expensive. It clearly showed his qualifications, sold his strengths with no misspellings or grammatical errors. It was, in my opinion, very professional and would help him stand out in a crowd.

"It looks fine," I said quizzically at his tone, "I don't see anything wrong with it." I was trying to make eye contact, but he was looking down and away.

"There must be something wrong with it. There has to be. Over the last seven months, I've mailed out over two hundred of these," he said coldly with a stone face, "and I am still unemployed."

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The Condition

It is called Compulsive Resume Addiction or CRA. It is a condition where a person becomes totally dependent and reliant on a piece of paper to get them new employment. It as insidious as any other form of addiction in that a person manifests a short term gratification seeking behavior with a long term cost in self-esteem and self-confidence.

CRA is similar to a lottery mentality where a person buys so many tickets and is in such debt that the problem becomes the solution. In other words, the person believes that it only takes one ticket to hit the big one and the next one could be it, so they keep buying and cannot stop buying. Some people start out innocently buying lottery tickets in small quantities and later graduates to knowing deep down that something is wrong, yet continues to pour all their money into the gaming, just to get their losses back and then some. The same pattern emerges as a person denigrates into sending out more and more resumes.

Entry Point

Not every job hunter who mails out or e-mails resumes is a victim of CRA, but it is important to recognize the few where the pattern does develop because these people are suffering from emotional pain as real as any other emotionally traumatizing experience.

Here is how the pattern begins. A person loses their job and is faced with several months of unemployment compensation. They may pull out their old resume, develop a new one, or have one professionally done. Next, they prepare the cover letter and proceed to mail and/or e-mail the resume out to the first newspaper ad or Internet job

posting that looks remotely desirable. At this initial phase, there is hope and sense of anticipation. They may think, "Okay, I'm on my way."

They wait for a phone call that never comes. Every day they check their e-mail or go to the mailbox and every day they are met by bills, junk mail, and deeper loss and anger. They try to solace themselves, "Ah well, no one is hiring."

They send out a few more resumes and cover letters. During the correspondence preparation, there is continued hope and renewed confidence as they believe they are taking control and giving it the big push. And everyday, there is still no response. Hope begins to wane as the shadows of thoughts begin to cast that they have mailed the resumes into a black hole at the end of the universe or they were swallowed up in some resume hell.

They try a different strategy. They do not wait for want ads or postings, but mail them directly off to companies picked out of the yellow pages or search engines. They think, "Ah, the direct approach." After a dozen or so of these, the only daytime calls received are from telemarketers. And bill collectors.

Hope is gone now and anger, frustration, and depression set in. Stress and the feeling of being trapped become overwhelming. They begin to personalize and internalize the rejection. The grim reality of the situation sets in. "It's not the resumes, it's me," they think in a mixed sobering moment of both clarity and defeat.

Not being able to stand any more rejection, they dread the thought of even sending out any more resumes. But send them out they do, singularly and by the handfuls. The days drag on and turn to weeks and the unemployment compensation is dwindling

It is time for probably long overdue action. They reason, "There must be something wrong with the resume." So it is time to come up with a better resume. Off to the library or the Internet they go to check out every resume book and article they can get. They go by the author's suggestions and advice. Finally, at the end of several days, a better resume and renewed and restored hope. They think, "If this doesn't work, nothing will."

They start the cycle again, sending out better resumes to ads and companies. The old feeling of excited anticipation fleetingly reappears, "I can almost feel my new paycheck in my hands." they think.

All too soon, the sickening feeling of dread returns and grows stronger with each passing day. Success becomes measured in rejection letters as at least it is some response, but still no job. They long for the good times when they were happy and wonder if they will ever smile again.

A few more weeks go by with no results and more bill collectors hounding. They are down to the last month of their unemployment compensation. It is time for even more drastic measures. They think, "Time to pull out all the stops and go for broke." They tried sending more, they tried sending better, and it is time to try something different.

They mail out resumes on good quality paper, scanning a picture and printing the color image in the corner of the resume, one page resumes, two pages resumes, bifold and trifold resumes, resumes with their names and addresses on the bottom, or name on the side, and resumes with less details and more details.

And still they cannot break through the seemingly impenetrable employment wall.

The unemployment compensation is gone. The last check has arrived, already spent and panic sets in. They try more better, better different, more different, better more, different more and now they are approaching nearly several hundred resumes e-mailed, faxed, and mailed.

Hooked

They are obsessed with sticking with the plan. Somewhere, a long time ago, from someone, they heard that getting a job is a numbers game, the more you get out there, the better one's chances. They think, "I must be getting close, after all, sooner or later, I have to get lucky."

They dip into savings or begin selling personal items to pay bills and stay afloat. With every passing day, with every no response, and with every reject letter, a little more of them dies inside. They remember the early days when the tears flowed, but now, they have cried their eyes out and there are no more tears. There is no feeling, no hope, no anger, and even trying to feel hurts too much. There is only the numbness of emotional shutdown.

It is at this moment, after hundreds of resumes and months of trying when what seems like an awful and horrible thought comes to them. Actually, it was there all along only something they have not wanted to face. It was always in the back of their mind, lurking like a demon in the dark. They never wanted to acknowledge the notion as it seemed so absurd and preposterous. Now they must face their worst fears and nightmares and stand up to the truth, the truth they had always known, feared, and dreaded. It is the reason, the answer, it has to be. "I have wasted all this time, energy,

and money," they yell, almost heaving. "Of course, it has to be. It's the COVER LETTER!"

You see where this is going. They try more cover letters, better cover letters, different cover letters, and so on. As you can imagine, these people have indeed worked hard at their job hunt, maybe to the point of exhaustion. Yet, they are still unable to secure new employment.

Counseling Considerations

Bear in mind that with so many resumes out, there is a chance that at any moment, they could receive a call that leads to a hiring interview, which turns into a job offer. If this were the case, it makes all the resumes, cover letters, and pain somehow worth it, that is, until the next job hunt.

Barring a new job offer though, how do we as Career Counselors and Job Search Facilitators counsel these people out of this destructive self-defeating cycle?

Just as with any addiction, the person must want help and admit they have a problem. A positive sign is when they talk like, "I have the feeling that I am missing something about getting a job, but I don't know what it is." Indeed, it may not be a compulsive behavior, they may merely be thinking this is the best or only way to conduct a job hunt and are open to anything that appears to work better.

On the other hand, they may be so ingrained in bad job search technique, behavior, and habit that getting them to try and stay on the road to recovery is difficult. Every time they hit a frustration or a bump in the road, say an interview rejection, they go

right back to sending out the resumes again and disregard your expert suggestions and advice, thus prolonging the unemployment time.

Counseling Techniques

The first counseling technique to attempt is to show them graphs of labor market studies and their chances of job acquisition success. In some studies, resumes may have anywhere from a one to a five to a twenty four per cent chance of helping them get a job. Some studies even suggest their odds are even less with e-mailing their resume or posting it on internet job boards, approaching probabilities of less than one percent.

The point you must try to communicate is the problem is not them, their qualifications, abilities, and/or resume why they are unemployed. **It is the way and method they are conducting their job hunt as to why they are unemployed.** This affirmation has done wonders to help lift people's self-esteem.

The second counseling technique is show them they do have worth and someone will hire them. Occupational research in career and vocational areas has proven helpful with this.

Information interviewing is a useful technique to not only gather information, but also to get them used to getting out and talking to people in a job search situation, something vitally needed but seriously lacking in these people. Informational interviewing will lay some valuable foundation for proper and effective job search technique.

This is a key point as studies show that using your networks (it's not what you know, it's who you know) and/or contacting employers directly (pounding the pavement,

hitting the streets) are, statistically speaking, the two highest percentage job search methods. Calling employers to inquire about openings and following-up in person ranks up there in statistical effectiveness, too.

Your task becomes training, coaching, encouraging, and supporting any of their efforts to adjust and transition to these methods.

Case Examples

I have seen wonderful results in a short time. There was the case of Joe from Wooster, Ohio. Joe was a laid off sales and marketing representative from a large company. He was, also, awful with his puns, word plays, and one-liners. He had been out of work for eight months and mailed out over fifty resumes, which brought him several interviews, but no offers. However, he knew instinctively that something was wrong, but he did not know what.

I asked Joe about his sales abilities. He was the top producer for his former company, before he got caught in a restructuring and downsizing. He said that he broke all kinds of company sales records. I asked him how and he said, "I don't take no for an answer. I call or I go to companies, meet with the decision makers and hound them until they say yes."

I asked him how he thought he would have done if he had sat in his office and mailed out his company's brochures? He replied, "I probably wouldn't have made many sales at all."

I asked him, "Then why are you doing that now?"

He looked at me puzzled and said, "What do you mean?"

"You are not making calls, meeting people, hounding them, and not taking no for answer. You are trying to get a piece a paper to get you a job."

"But I thought mailing out resumes was how you get a job!"

"No, mailing out resumes is why you stay unemployed. How you sold for your company is how you get a job. It is the same thing."

I could almost see the light bulb go off over his head as he slumped forward in his chair and his head dropped. He rubbed his temples for a moment and still looking down said almost gutturally, "I have wasted eight months."

"Well now you know what to do," I said, "so start today."

Within the next two months, he had a number of interviews and two job offers presented themselves on the same day. He took the better deal.

This was a quick recovery as the gentleman was not compulsively ingrained in the addiction, but simply did not know there was any other way. Solid job search information and instruction re-directed his job search method and increased his ultimate chances of success many fold.

Not as fortunate and successful was Lola. Lola was a laid off professional office worker in her mid fifties, divorced, but always had a smile on her face and was quick to show the latest pictures of her baby granddaughter.

By Lola's estimation, she had mailed out in the neighborhood of twenty-five resumes. She had several interviews, but was still unemployed. She came to me for help on her job search. Really, her motive, either intentional or unintentional, was to go the better and/or different resume route.

I trained her in effective job search technique including, getting one's foot in the door, interview skills, and follow-up tactics. She later confided that she was uncomfortable with these methods and merely wanted her resume looked at and revised. She felt that as she was still unemployed, the answer was, there was something wrong with her resume. This is a person who is heading down the road of CRA. Either she takes to her newly trained job search skills, gets real lucky and has a resume hit, or she will be in for a rough ride in the downward spiral.

Most unfortunate of all was Willie. Willie was a likeable, yet quiet little man with a round face in his mid-fifties. He was a laid off Efficiency Engineer by trade and full-blown victim of Compulsive Resume Addiction. Every time he met someone, he took a folded resume out of his suit coat and handed it to the person. Though not a bad choice of job search methods, it was a predictor of his entire job search as he had personally had printed up and mailed out over five hundred massed produced and mailed resumes and cover letters.

I tried the above methods to show him that there were other more effective methods of job search to employ, but he disdained them and continued to mail out more resumes. I really believe that the full extent of this activity had taken its awful emotional toll and Willie was willing to live or die with this method. I kept in touch with Willie for over two years and he never did get work during that time.

Summing Up

In closing, it should be pointed out that if a person is trying, they can succeed and a new job could be as close as sending out the next resume. However, what seems like

the easy way at the outset, mailing out resumes, could really be the hard way and what seems like the hard way, initially, networking and contacting employers directly, in the long run may be the easier way.

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